

**“Stonewall’s Children:
Life, Loss, and Love after Liberation”**

2009 Nicholas Papadopoulos Lecture

delivered by

***Timothy Patrick McCarthy
Starr Auditorium
Harvard Kennedy School
Friday, April 24, 2009***

I’d like to begin by giving thanks:

To my very dear friend and colleague **Dr. Susan Marine**—for that unnecessarily gracious but much appreciated introduction. What would I do without you?

To another dear friend **Paul McLoughlin**, and all my colleagues in the **Harvard College Dean’s Office**—for sponsoring the Papadopoulos lecture. And to the **family of Nicholas Papadopoulos**—for establishing this lecture in the first place. What a powerful way to honor a son’s life and legacy. I hope I’m up to the task.

To **Joe McCarthy, Margaret McNulty, and everyone in the Office of Degree Programs at the Kennedy School, and to my new colleagues at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy**—for your support of today’s events, and for embracing our rights as human rights.

To **Thor Steingraber, Mary Alice McCarthy, Paige Ennis, Joe Angelo** and all the **student volunteers**—for making today happen. It’s nice to see the rumblings of real community here.

And to **all my students**—in the College and the Kennedy School— for making me feel like the luckiest man on the face of the earth.

To our distinguished guests—**Rev. Irene Monroe, Sky Johnson, Dan Choi, Stuart Milk, and Dustin Lance Black**—for your leadership in the struggle. Thank you for being part of this special day.

To **my parents**—my roots and my rock—for loving me, *always*, especially when I didn’t love myself.

And to **C.J.**—the one—for finally giving me a reason to love.

I want to dedicate this lecture to **my brother Malcolm**, who could not be here today because he's working over time to make a little extra money. In a few weeks, Malcolm will become a father for the first time. He and his girlfriend are going to have a little girl. They will call her Malia, a very popular name these days. A decade ago—Malcolm was just thirteen—I returned to Cambridge to become his guardian. He is the closest thing I have to a son. I was in the closet then, a 26-year-old graduate student charged with raising someone else's child. Needless to say, I had more pressing things to deal with. But Malcolm knew. One night after school, he asked me a very simple question: "Tim, are you gay?" I didn't know how to answer. He asked again: "Tim, are you gay?" Still, no answer. Then he said this: "Tim, it's a simple question. If you asked me, *Are you black?* I'd say yes." [PAUSE] People used to say that I saved Malcolm's life, but really, it's the other way around. Malia is a lucky little girl.

[LONG PAUSE]

Those of you who know me well know that I am always having a conversation across the grave with James Baldwin. Just before I gave up Church the second time, during my junior year of college, I discovered Jimmy. And thank God. In important ways, he was a kindred spirit—a fellow misfit, a heretic and homosexual, a perpetual critic who looked directly into America’s racial and sexual nightmare and saw the potential for love. He knew that real progress required it.

This is not an easy thing—to find love in hate—especially when you have enjoyed more than your fair share of the latter and not nearly enough of the former. And yet Jimmy struggled to do just that. I’m not sure he ever got there—and I’m quite sure we’re not there yet—but he left a remarkable record of his efforts, a road map of sorts. I wish more of us tried as hard as Jimmy did.

In his breathtaking classic, *The Fire Next Time*, he wrote: “It is the responsibility of free men to trust and to celebrate what is constant—birth, struggle, and death are constant, and so is love, though we may not always think so—and to apprehend the nature of change, to be able and willing to change. I speak of change not on the surface but in the depths—change in the sense of renewal.”

Much has changed since Jimmy wrote those words, in the 1960s, amidst the various revolutions that would liberate so many of us. We are right to desire change, to seek progress, to aspire to higher things—security and success, of course, but also freedom and equality, the right to live lives of decency and dignity. Such aspirations—these pursuits of happiness—are fundamentally human, and they animate our demands to be treated as such. *Birth, struggle, death, and love*—common things, human things, the things we use to make progress and measure it.

It's been quite a year for progress. The end of the Bush era. The election of the first African-American President. Gay marriage in Iowa. (Between the Caucuses and the recent court ruling, Iowa has become my new favorite state!) We have much to celebrate.

This June, we celebrate the 40th anniversary of another milestone: the birth of the gay liberation movement. On the night of June 28, 1969, a series of public conflicts broke out between the police and the patrons of the Stonewall Inn, a popular gay bar in New York City's West Village. The Stonewall "riots," as they were then called, became the symbolic "spark" for the modern gay rights movement. In other words, Stonewall was to gay liberation what the bus boycotts and sit-ins had been to the

black freedom struggle—a people’s unambiguous refusal to be treated as anything less than human.

It’s easy to look back to a world of closets and color lines and see just how far we’ve come. That’s not to say there aren’t still too many closets and color lines; we’re still en route to the Promised Land. For those of us who are *queer*—and yes, I will use “queer” throughout my talk today (more on that later)—progress has been relatively swift, especially when we stop to consider how long the struggle for black freedom in this country has been. This is not to privilege one form of oppression over another—I’m not in the business of privileging any form of oppression—but just to acknowledge that we all have different stories, and that comparisons are not always neat or easy. Neither, of course, is community. This reinforces the point that Reverend Irene Monroe was making earlier about the intersection of race and sexuality (and gender and class): too often we talk about these things—being black, being queer—as if they never come together in the same person or people. But of course they do. And that is why it’s so crucial that we never give up the tough search for common ground, for empathy, for intersection, solidarity. We have precious little of these things in this world. Ultimately, our full human liberation requires us to fight not only

for ourselves but for each other, too. And we must do so, Jimmy reminds us, “for the sake of those who are coming after us.”

On the eve of Stonewall, we also have an opportunity—I’d go so far to say an *obligation*—to think about those who came *before* us, the generations of queer folk who paved the way, who have made it easier for us. In doing so, I am mindful of how each generation—today, I will refer to them as the Stonewall generation, the AIDS generation, and the Marriage generation—has been shaped by its own particular moment in time. And together, they have shaped all of us. This is not to say that Stonewall, AIDS, and Marriage are the only lenses through which we can understand the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. Far from it. But I do think that they provide useful touchstones for our modern history as a people—which is, after all, a complex story of life, loss, and love after liberation.

I have a peculiar vantage point on this history: I was born two years after Stonewall; I was too young to have experienced the full terror of AIDS; and I am too old and radical, perhaps, to see marriage as the final frontier of liberation. What follows, then, are the reflections of a misfit. Take them as you will.

* * * *

It all started in a bar. Around 1:20 am on June 28, 1969—you know, that hazy time when Friday night turns into Saturday morning—a group of plainclothes police officers raided the Stonewall Inn, a popular, mafia-owned gay bar located on Christopher Street in New York City’s West Village. The bar had been raided earlier that week—raids on gay bars were common at the time—leading one observer to say: “Times are a-changin’. Tuesday night was the last night for bullshit. On Wednesday and Thursday nights grumbling could be heard among the limp wristed set. Predominantly, the theme [w]as, ‘this shit has got to stop!’”

The bar was crowded that night, more crowded than usual for a Friday. And it was hot as hell, even for June in New York. Just before the cops arrived, one patron put a coin in the jukebox. Out came Mick Jagger’s voice: “I can’t get no satisfaction.” And that’s not just because the go-go boys weren’t yet go-going home with the patrons. It wasn’t easy being gay in 1969. And so the liquor flowed and the night wore on.

Who knows why or how the stars aligned that night, what mix of forces conspired to transform a bar for a bunch of ‘mos into a birthplace for a movement: anger over the previous Tuesday’s raid, a possible mafia tip-off, the sweltering heat, the restless crowd, the late-night timing, Mick Jagger’s lament, the countless queens in the joint who were

singing the very same tune—or perhaps it was the very full moon? We do know that it had nothing to do with the funeral of Judy Garland, which had taken place earlier that day, and which one very snide (and straight) commentator suggested was the cause of all the subsequent hysteria. Some of us may very well be “Friends of Dorothy,” but she was hardly the face that launched a thousand queers.

But something did happen that night: the queers fought back!

Lucien Truscott, a West Point graduate on leave from the military at the time, covered the Stonewall protests for *The Village Voice*. In his article, “Gay Power Comes to Sheridan Square,” Truscott wrote: “The forces of faggotry, spurred by a Friday night raid on one of the city’s largest, most popular, and longest lived gay bars, the Stonewall Inn, rallied Saturday night in an unprecedented protest against the raid and continued Sunday night to assert presence, possibility, and pride until the early hours of Monday morning. ‘I’m a faggot, and I’m proud of it!’ ‘Gay Power!’ ‘I like boys!’—these and many other slogans were heard all three nights as the show of force by the city’s finery met the force of the city’s finest. The result was a kind of liberation, as the gay brigade emerged from the bars, back rooms, and bedrooms of the Village and became street people.”

“Stonewall”—this moment of rebellion that coalesced into a new symbol of liberation—went on for five nights. Dozens of folks arrested. Hundreds of cops on the scene. Several thousand people protesting. It was, as one eyewitness quipped, the “hairpin drop heard around the world.” Or as my mentor and friend, the pioneering gay historian Marty Duberman has put it, “Stonewall is the emblematic event in modern lesbian and gay history...an empowering symbol of global proportions.”

All movements need origin myths. And Stonewall is ours. It did certainly “announce” something new in the culture: that gays, lesbians, bisexuals, trans folk—all were there those nights—were willing to fight back like never before. In important ways, it marked the beginning of new era of protest and visibility, what we might call the “Stonewall generation.” Half a decade earlier, within the context of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., characterized the spirit he saw as a “marvelous new militancy.” For our purposes, we might call it a “fabulous new ferocity.” Either way, you get the point: times were ‘a-changin’.

Because of its larger-than-life presence in the modern history of queer folk, Stonewall functions as both a myth and a symbol. As the distinguished gay historian John D’Emilio has argued, the central

assumptions we make about Stonewall—that it “came out of the blue and started everything”; that “spontaneous riots and street action are the necessary keys to social change”; and that “the most oppressed will lead the way”—are “almost completely untrue.” In other words, we see in Stonewall what we want to see—those of us who were there as well as those of us who weren’t.

Now this is not to say that the myth of Stonewall as the symbolic birthplace of queer “liberation” does not serve important psychological and political purposes. Narratives of agency—the stories we tell about ourselves to demonstrate that our subjectivity is at least as important as our subjugation—can be inspiring and empowering, a way to transform victimhood into citizenship.

My chosen field of expertise—African-American history—offers a powerful model of what I mean. In the long march from slavery to freedom, black folks have recorded their stories—in spoken and written word—as a way to counter historical erasure and challenge political exclusion. More to the point, African Americans also remember their stories; they teach them, add to them, pass them down from generation to generation. This construction of a “usable past”—what my mentor Manning Marable calls “living black history”—has helped to nurture

both resilience and resistance. It has been an important animating force in the long black freedom struggle. As Marable writes, “History is...the architecture of a people’s memory, framed by our shared rituals, traditions, and notions of common sense. It can be a ragged bundle of hopes, especially for those who have been relegated beyond society’s brutal boundaries...for the oppressed, the act of reconstructing history is inextricably linked to the political practices...of transforming the present and the future.” This helps to explain why, on Inauguration Day, when President-elect Barack Obama stopped to shake the hand of Congressman John Lewis, the aging icon of the Civil Rights Movement, he autographed his program with the words: “Because of you, John.”

And yet, when I stop to dream of that distant day when our first queer President is sworn into office, I fear there might be a different inscription: “Because of who?”

As a people, I think we’ve done a rather poor job of creating our own usable past—a “living queer history”—that allows us to see more clearly whence we came. At the risk of sounding like a bitter old queen:

How many queer-identified students have ever taken a course on queer history, or literature, or politics?

How many straight-identified students have even *thought* about taking such a course?

How many courses are there to take?

How many of us realized that this June marks the 40th anniversary of Stonewall? And how—aside from Pride parades and block parties—are we planning to commemorate it?

How many of us knew about Harvey Milk before the movie? How much did we know about him?

How many of us knew that the first film about Harvey Milk to earn an Academy Award—the documentary of his “life and times,” based on the biography by gay journalist Randy Shilts—appeared back in 1984, not 2008? The film won the Oscar for Best Documentary film in 1985. How many of us have seen it?

How many of us know what a “blue discharge” or the “lavender menace” refers to?

How many of us have read Langston Hughes’s poem, “Café, 3 A.M.,” or James Baldwin’s novel, *Giovanni’s Room*?

How many of us know who Jim Kepner or Gore Vidal or Patricia Highsmith or Edith Eyde are?

How many of us know why Harry Hay, Frank Kameny, Del Martin, and Phyllis Lyon are important? How about Barbara Gittings or “Dr. H Anonymous” or Sylvia Rivera?

Who can tell me about the Mattachine Society?

The Daughters of Bilitis?

ONE Magazine? *The Ladder?* Executive Order 10450?

Who in this room could tell me how to get to the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop? Is it still open?

If this were a test—and it is, in a way, a test—many of us would fail, queer and straight alike.

For queer folks, the root of our problem as a people—if indeed we can even call ourselves that—is that we do not know our history. And I’m not talking about facts and dates, or even the order of things. I mean history in a deeper sense: Where do we come from? Who are we? By not knowing our history, we facilitate our own rootlessness, or worse—our erasure. We also rob ourselves of full membership in the human community, the full capacity to be part of the broader historical struggle for human rights. Again, I return to Marable, who talks about the “process of discovery,” one that “can produce a desire to join with others to build initiatives that create space, permitting the renewal or

survival of a group, or a celebration of its continued existence despite the forces arrayed against it.” Or as the poet Adrienne Rich put it: “it is the present that calls us to activism, it is history that must nourish our choices and commitment.”

When all is said and done, how meaningful a celebration can it be if we don’t even know what we’re celebrating? Pride, remember, can be a sin—especially if it’s propped up by ignorance.

Ironically, Stonewall is part of the problem—and there are three main reasons for this. First, positioning Stonewall as a mythical point of origin divides modern queer history too neatly into the period “Before Stonewall” and “After Stonewall.” This has the unfortunate effect of seeing the early period as somehow tragic, a pre-history of repression, when, in fact, much of the crucial groundwork for “liberation”—the formation of “homophile” groups, the publication of gay and lesbian periodicals, path-breaking research on human sexuality, challenges to laws policing “obscenity” and “sexual perversion,” public protests over discrimination in the military and government employment—was laid long before June 1969. As D’Emilio writes, “ a street riot in New York could lead to the flowering of the gay liberation movement precisely

because the soil had been fertilized and the seeds planted by the preceding generation.” In other words, *it didn't all start in a bar*.

Second, the privileging of Stonewall has led to an obsession with “coming out.” Ever since the late 1960s and 1970s, there has been an increasingly urgent—at times militant, even irresponsible—call to “come out of the closet.” As gay liberationist Carl Wittman wrote in his 1970 “Gay Manifesto”: “If we are liberated we are open with our sexuality. Closet queenery must end. *Come out.*” As heirs to the “spirit of Stonewall,” many gay and lesbian activists consider “coming out” to be both a prerequisite for and a manifestation of the freedom that comes with equal citizenship. Often times, those of us who are “out”—who openly, even proudly express our sexuality to friends, colleagues, and loved ones—consider “being out” as the preferred or ideal state of being. Anything else is a violation of one’s autonomy or free will, an act of betrayal or deception, an internalization of society’s homophobia.

Such a perspective—one that affords “being out” a normative or privileged status—runs the risk of participating in precisely the same processes of isolation and alienation that “coming out” was ostensibly meant to avoid. As “out” queers, we therefore become complicit in the oppression of our own brothers and sisters: those who aren’t out; those

who are terrified to come out; those who will never come out or don't want to come out; those who are out to some but not others; and those for whom "out" is not a useful term of self-identification. We would do well to remember that Carl Wittman, an admittedly passionate advocate for "coming out," also had compassion for those who weren't yet ready to do so: "The fear of coming out is not paranoia; the stakes are high: loss of family ties, loss of jobs, loss of straight friends—these are all reminders that the oppression is not just in our heads. It's real...We must afford our brothers and sisters the same patience we afforded ourselves." Not all of us have experienced liberation in the same way. Some of us, perhaps even most of us, haven't experienced it at all.

And yet, modern queer histories paint a very different story. A quick sampling of book titles on the shelves in my office illustrates this point: *No Turning Back*, *Coming Out*, *After You're Out*, *Out for Good*, and *Come Out Fighting*. There is an unmistakable triumphalism here, a sense of pride and achievement for battles hard fought and won that nevertheless obscures a far more complicated history of gender and sexuality. Indeed, this triumphalism reinforces the Stonewall origin myth: before Stonewall, we were *in the closet*; after Stonewall, we were *out for good*.

There is, of course, an explanation for this. With few exceptions, the principal chroniclers of modern queer history were themselves veterans of “the movement,” and activists are often the first to sacralize the Stonewall “creation myth.” Even those of us who were too young to remember Stonewall still identify powerfully—and politically—with its symbolism. I am no exception. But too much of our history focuses on the experiences of those who have participated in “the struggle.” This has led to a real distortion of the historical record: focusing too much attention on the experience of urban, mostly white, bourgeois gays and lesbians who were part of the movement and who have also left a large enough paper trail for historians to follow. Not coincidentally, these are also the folks who have largely determined the shape and scope of the movement. Even when scholars and activists try to broaden the scope of their investigations beyond, say, San Francisco and New York, they still tend to focus mainly on urban areas—what I call “cosmopolitan homosexuality”—where the prominent LGBT organizations are based. This leads to a skewed sense of who constitutes “our” “we,” as well as a history and politics that is neither inclusive nor representative.

And this leads to the third problem of positioning Stonewall as “the” starting point: the sense that we are moving, inexorably and

inevitably, in the direction of progress. I began my remarks today by saying that LGBT people have enjoyed “relatively swift” progress, and this is true in many respects. But we need look no further than the celebrity death match between court rulings and ballot initiatives to understand several things about our place in American society: first, our rights are never guaranteed; second, we will always need to fight like hell to ensure and protect our rights; and third, we cannot rely on someone else to do this work for us.

Just ask Harvey Milk, the former San Francisco Supervisor, the first openly gay elected official in America, the “Mayor of Castro Street.” A man with little reason to hope for much of his life, Milk became the embodiment of hope—feisty, tough, resilient hope, the very best kind—for the Stonewall generation. In a speech to the California Democratic Council on March 10, 1978, he repeated a riff from his stump speech: “You have to give them hope. Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow, hope for a better place to come to if the pressures at home are too great. Hope that it will be all right. Without hope, not only gays, but the blacks, the seniors, the handicapped, the us’es, the us’es will give up. And if you help elect...more gay people, that gives a green light to all who feel disenfranchised, a green light to move forward. It means hope

to a nation that has given up, because if a gay person makes it, the doors are open to everyone.” Less than a year after this speech, Milk was shot dead in his office by fellow San Francisco Supervisor Dan White. On the night he was assassinated, as tens of thousands of mourners—queer and straight alike—walked solemnly with candles down Market Street into Milk’s beloved Castro, it was clear that queer liberation would have to figure out a way to deal with loss—the loss of life, the loss of leaders, the loss of hope.

* * * *

Few could have imagined that the loss of Harvey Milk was just the beginning. For queer people, the 1980s was the deadliest of decades, one in which the AIDS “plague,” as Larry Kramer put it, constituted a “Holocaust” for gay people.

On June 5, 1981—as it turns out, three days before my tenth birthday—the Center for Disease Control reported that in the period between October 1980-May 1981, five homosexual men were treated for a rare combination of symptoms at three different hospitals in Los Angeles. On July 4th, the CDC reported that during the preceding 30 months, 26 cases of Kaposi Sarcoma had been reported among gay men; eight of them had died within 24 months of diagnosis. On July 27, 1982,

the term AIDS—“Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome”—was used for the very first time to describe the growing health crisis: 853 known deaths in 1982.

It is worth noting that the CDC was a voice in the wilderness in terms of its early public warnings about AIDS. Most of the medical establishment either ignored it or made light of it. One medical journal went so far as to suggest that “perhaps we’ve needed a situation like this to show us what we have known all along—depravity kills.” The dean of UCSF—one of the most esteemed medical centers in the nation, where a great deal of early AIDS research was conducted—went on record with this homophobic gem: “At least with AIDS, a lot of undesirable people will be eliminated.” It was this climate of professional irresponsibility and personal ignorance that led queer activists to establish their own public health organizations—like the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, founded in New York City in 1982—to confront the growing crisis. In addition to radical groups like Queer Nation and ACT-UP—whose ubiquitous slogan “Silence=Death” became a symbol of the age—the GMHC occupied the front lines of the increasingly lethal culture war that characterized the AIDS generation.

It is not hyperbole to say that AIDS is one of the best modern examples—a dire warning for us all—of just how lethal it can be when elected politicians, respected academics, and everyday citizens allow prejudice to infect their public conscience.

My students—many of whom were born as the 1980s were ending—often ask me why I hate Ronald Reagan. Aside from courting a near nuclear Holocaust, it was the “Great Communicator,” the “Gipper,” whose silence fueled the AIDS crisis. Few American Presidents have gone to the grave with hands as deeply saturated with the blood of innocents. Reagan’s spectacular ascendancy was enabled by the rabid rise of the Religious Right, the so-called “Moral Majority,” as the Reverend Jerry Falwell and his fear-mongering foot-soldiers called themselves. Indeed, it was Falwell himself who said that “AIDS is the wrath of God upon homosexuals,” a line he would reprise, and revise, years later when he absurdly blamed 9/11 on “abortionists, feminists, gays and lesbians, and the ACLU,” among others. Then there’s Reagan’s communications director Patrick Buchanan, who said: “AIDS is nature’s revenge on gay men.” (It’s a delicious irony that our revenge on Pat Buchanan comes in the fabulous form of Rachel Maddow’s routine

public shamings of him on MSNBC. If I ever go back to women, Rachel will be my second stop—after Susan Marine, of course.)

Not everyone in Reagan's circle was as providential as Falwell and Buchanan. Some of his handlers just made fun of all the death. Take, for instance, this October 15, 1982, exchange between a reporter and White House spokesman Larry Speakes (I know, you can't make this stuff up!):

Journalist: Larry, does the President have any reaction to the announcement, by the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, that AIDS is now an epidemic with over 600 cases?

Mr. Speakes: What's AIDS?

Journalist: Over a third of them have died. It's known as the "gay plague." (Laughter.) No, it is. I mean it's a pretty serious thing that one in every three people that get this has died. I wondered if the President is aware of it?

Mr. Speakes: I don't have it. Do you? (Laughter.)

Journalist: No, I don't.

Mr. Speakes: You didn't answer my question.

Journalist: Well, I just wondered, does the President—

Mr. Speakes: How do you know? (Laughter.)

Journalist: Are you saying the White House looks on this as a great joke?

Mr. Speakes: No, I don't know anything about it, Lester.

Journalist: Does the President—does anyone in the White House—know about this epidemic, Larry?

Mr. Speakes: I don't think so. I don't think there's been any—

Journalist: Nobody knows?

Mr. Speakes: There has been no personal experience here, Lester. I checked thoroughly with [the President's doctor] this morning and he's had no—(laughter)—no patients suffering from AIDS or whatever it is.

Journalist: The President doesn't have the gay plague, is that what you're saying?

Mr. Speakes: No, I didn't say that.

Journalist: Didn't say that?

Mr. Speakes: I thought you covered the State Department, Lester—why didn't you stay over there?

Journalist: Because I love you, Larry, that's why. (Laughter.)

Mr. Speakes: Oh, I see. Just don't put it in those terms, Lester. (Laughter.)

Journalist: Oh, I retract that.

Mr. Speakes: I hope so.

Journalist: It's too late.

Well, it was too late. But this was no laughing matter. By the time Ronald Reagan finally gave a speech about AIDS—on May 31, 1987, near the end of his second term—36,058 Americans had been diagnosed with AIDS and 20,849 of them, well over half, were dead. A disease that had first been detected among 5 gay men in Los Angeles had spread to 113 countries, with more than 50,000 cases. When Ronald Reagan finally went to hell (God rest his soul) in June 2004—as it turns out, a few days before my 33rd birthday—the World Health Organization estimated that 40 million people were living with HIV across the globe. An estimated 5 million people were newly infected and 3 million people died of AIDS in 2003 alone. To date, more than 25 million people worldwide have died from a disease that our widely beloved President Reagan didn't acknowledge until he had nearly lost his wits. 33 million more are currently living with HIV/AIDS, 25 million in Africa. 2 million people die of AIDS every year, and HIV infection is rising in communities of color right here in the United States. That's a lot of blood to have on your hands, Gipper. Silence equals death indeed.

But death has had a queer way of inducing silence in many of us as well. AIDS has taken too many of us—and here I mean “us” in the broadest sense of the word. But it has also taken its toll on the living. Let me share a story with you that I have never told in a public setting.

[Experience volunteering at an AIDS Hospice in Boston during my freshman year—high school reporting—Queer Nation—Jarrett Barrios and Sandi Dubowski, FUP—wanted to do my part. Keep in mind that I was, at this time a “straight ally.” One of my favorite pictures from my college is me wearing a “Straight but not narrow” T-shirt. I always did have an acute appreciation for irony. Anyway...story of Jim, corner room, conversation about death, really moved me, came back the next week and his room was empty, bed made, pictures gone. Jim was the first person I ever knew personally who died of AIDS. He is also the last. Turns out Jim was more ready for death than I was, and that’s still true.]

Frankly, I worry about the toll that AIDS has taken. Not just the loss of so many of our brothers and sisters, though that is a tragedy from which we will never liberate ourselves. I mean the loss of spirit that so many in the AIDS generation have experienced; the loss of hope that characterized so many in the Stonewall generation; the loss of stories about the armies of caretakers who ministered to the sick and

suffering, especially our lesbian sisters, the unsung heroines of that age; the loss of our ability to mourn or deal with loss in our own lives; the loss of our concern for how AIDS continues to plague our community, especially among African Americans, right here in the United States; the loss of our collective sense of just how deeply we have been scarred by the fact that our history, our identity—as a people—has been shaped by death and the silence that both produced and followed it.

I can't help but think that these scars are what led a prominent queer Harvard graduate to tell me that we didn't need an "AIDS panel" on the program of the HGLC 25th Anniversary, because "AIDS wasn't a death sentence for us any more."

Or what enabled an administrator at this esteemed university to tell one of my students that "Harvard kids don't get AIDS."

Or what possessed a gay friend of mine to say to me that "AIDS is an African thing now."

Perhaps AIDS isn't quite the death sentence it used to be for some people with the means to afford the right medicine.

And perhaps AIDS is less prevalent at Harvard than it is in other places.

And perhaps AIDS is now more of a crisis in Soweto than San Francisco.

And perhaps we will see the end of AIDS in our lifetime.

Perhaps.

But as long as a small boy in South Africa has AIDS, I have AIDS.

As long as a female sex slave in Thailand has AIDS, I have AIDS.

As long as a transgender youth anywhere has AIDS, I have AIDS.

As long as there *is* AIDS, we *all* have AIDS.

I first experienced the power of this kind of solidarity—spiritual connection forged through common struggle, the true meaning of life discovered in the midst of terrible loss—when I saw Tony Kushner’s epic play, “Angels in America,” the fall of my first semester of graduate school. Like so many of us, I was blown away by this theatrical miracle. What struck me most, however, was not the play itself, but the audience that had come to see it: queers and straights who, like the play’s main character, Prior Walter, had survived the AIDS generation. When the lights in the Walter Kerr Theatre went up, everyone around me was in tears—not the kind that merely dampen the cheeks; the kind that roll down like waterfalls. These were tears of loss among the living. I had only begun to understand, and to cry myself.

At the end of “Perestroika,” the second half of “Angels,” Prior speaks directly to us: “This disease will be the end of many of us, but not early all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won’t die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.”

* * * *

Well, the time *has* come for us to be citizens. Certainly, right now it feels as if the world is spinning forward with the swiftest cadence of inevitability. But as I have tried to suggest, progress is never inevitable; rather, our victories are the product of hard work by many people over many generations—not just the Stonewall generation, and the AIDS generation, and now the Marriage generation, but all the generations before them, too. We stand in the midst of a long history. As Ralph Ellison once wrote: “The end is in the beginning and lies far ahead.”

We find ourselves at a curious moment in this history. On the one hand, our future is bright—with victories from the bench and even at the ballot box. We finally have a genuine ally in the Presidency, a good and decent man who is also the strongest supporter of LGBT rights to ever occupy that office. He’s not perfect, of course. In many ways,

President Obama embodies the state of our union—far along, but not yet there. Fortunately, we are fired up and ready to go—a community blessed, in many instances, with ample riches, able minds, and eager activists. We are once again full of productive rage and prudent hope. But we still have many challenges—rights to protect, rights to win. As a people, we are not yet free.

Whether or not we get there will depend—most of all—on us. For those of us who live on the borderland of citizenship, we need not spend so much energy taking on the system that we forget to take care of our selves. As a people, we are not without our challenges: too many of us would rather spend a day at the spa than a night in jail; too few of us determine the “queer agenda,” and not enough of us are willing to fight for it. We have more divas than heroes. We don’t know enough about our history, and many of our leaders and celebrities have lost touch with their roots, animated by jet setting rather than justice. The Stonewall generation thinks the Marriage generation should get over itself and the Marriage generation thinks the Stonewall generation should get off its high horse. We still don’t know what to do with the AIDS generation. And we still have AIDS. The fags are from Mars and the dykes are from Venus. We diss the bi’s and throw the trans folk under the bus. There is

still too much mutual distrust between white queers and queers of color. Much of our community remains in the closet, sometimes for very legitimate reasons. And somewhere along the way the path to liberation got confused with the aisle to the alter.

Indeed, the Marriage generation is really a crossroads for us as a people. To be honest, I've always been uncomfortable with the concept of "marriage equality," knowing that it has too narrow an appeal, and knowing, as we all do, if we are honest with ourselves, that marriage is an institution that reinforces *inequalities*—of rights and privileges, of property and social status, of sense of self. And while I, too, wept when gay and lesbian couples were married in Massachusetts, in California, in Connecticut, in Vermont, and now in Iowa, I resist the temptation to think that equality can only come in being just like straight people. That's not liberation; that's imitation. I mean, what's the worst thing that's happened since the historic *Goodridge* ruling here in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts? The Goodridges got divorced.

This is not to say that C.J. and I won't get married some day. Indeed, we may, perhaps sooner than either of us thinks. But we will do so not merely because we have the *right* to marry each another—as wonderful as that is—but because we love one another, for better or for

worse, rich or poor, for as long as we both shall live. You see, there's a difference between love and rights. From my perspective, true human equality—a liberation that lasts—resides in the former, not just the latter.

Queers were never meant to be just like straight people. Indeed, the word “queer”—so often maligned, so often divisive—has actually had many meanings, in many cultures. And those meanings, those cultures, have changed over time, just like the people they attempt to describe and contain. I was particularly struck by two etymological findings from the Oxford English Dictionary: first, the 16th century German word, *quer*, meant “across from” or “traverse.” And the 19th century Irish English derivation, *quare*—when used as an intensifier—meant “excellent, good in quantity and quality.” Since I’m an intense Irishman, I’m of course partial to the second definition. But let me try my hand at synthesis: perhaps instead of trying to be “normal,” or just like straight people, we queers should become more comfortable with our place across from them. Perhaps if both straights and queers were to become more comfortable in their own skin—if we find a way to love one another—we will be able to see that we are both “excellent, good in quantity and quality.”

And so, we're queer. And we're here. To stay.

We are a people.

We are full of life.

We are strengthened by loss.

And we are ready to love.

We are Stonewall's children.

We stand on the shoulders of giants—descended from our own
kings and queens.

And some of those queens—*snap!*—wore heels.